JET LI AND THE NEW FACE OF CHINESE CINEMA:
NATIONALISM, MASCULINITY, AND ZHIJI
IN CONTEMPORARY WUXIA PIAN

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent Chinese martial arts films (*wuxia pian*) pose an interesting case of mythologized identity construction. Shared cultural myths form the basis for identity construction. By appealing to myth, identities gain historical, grounded credence while simultaneously adapting, changing, and renewing myths themselves. Several factors motivate Chinese directors to utilize this marginalized genre, including links to historical myth, appeals to timelessness, and less strict censorship. In order to explore the construction of a gendered, contemporary Chinese identity – or 'Chineseness' – this paper explores three films starring Jet Li (Li Lianjie). Each film uses a local or historic hero to present gender, nationalism, and recognition of worth (*zhiji*) in unique ways. What is crucial to these films is the manner in which China (*zhongguo*) is contrasted to a broader, mythic China (*tianxia*) and how the central character relates to these concepts. Further, each character comes from a different time period. Despite their temporal, geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences, each share in an idea of China which transcends mere nationalistic identity: their identities are informed by, and in turn inform, a broader sense of mythic 'Chineseness' which transcends categories of temporal and geographic frames. Finally, while Chinese directors are expected to adhere to a particular vision of nationalism, these films suggest that recent Chinese filmmakers use martial arts film for greater freedom in negotiating the boundaries of what it means to be Chinese, and these boundaries cross borders, both international and cultural.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

History is a contested site where meaning is negotiated. Meaning is constructed within specific moments of temporality and shifts accordingly. Historical meaning thus functions as a polysemic sign system. Thus, meanings change over time as the signification systems also change, allowing for multiple signifiers to be ascribed to the same signified. Attempting to identify the specific historical parameters which influence the relationship between signifier and signified functions presents the hazard of incorporating presentist sensibilities of interpretation. Memory plays an interesting role in the construction of historical meaning. Nostalgia and myth are methods by which history can be reconstructed with an entirely new framework of signification in which meaning is created out of the process of reimagining the past. According to Edward Said “myth does not analyze or solve problems. It represents them as already analyzed and solved; that is, it presents them as already assembled images” (Said 312). While 'historical accuracy' is problematized whenever nostalgia or myth are prevalent, meaning is still constructed: "nostalgia by definition represents not a seamless continuity with the past but an evocation of the past from a position fundamentally altered in some respect" (Hamm 23). The question becomes not whether nostalgic or mythic history is 'true' but in what ways

has history been subordinated to reconstruction and for what purpose. How the relationship between signifier and signified is determined within a mythic or nostalgic framework often reflects the anxieties and desires of the individual or community which constructs the myth.

According to Roland Barthes, "myth is a system of communication... it is a message" (Barthes 109). Myth is a means of communicating an ideal; such an ideal is always influenced by the historical moment when myth is created rather than by the historical moment which the myth describes. Myth communicates an idealized reflection of contemporary circumstances in the guise of history. In principle, myth functions to naturalize the nostalgic or idealized image in the contemporary audience: "it transforms history into nature" (Barthes 129). By creating a sense of naturalized history in a contemporary audience, the myth maker creates a specific impression which may later be shown to be inaccurate or false. However, "it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it" (Barthes 130). A historicist fixation on truth within the context of the historical moment is irrelevant within a mythic construction. The only relevance of a myth is whether or not the message conveyed by the myth is received by a particular audience. For *wuxia* films, myth is inscribed in codes which "persist as mythic symbols of national identity, ideal masculine behavior, and institutional governance that are reconstituted in various ways in films within different national and non-national settings" (Berry 136).

My project involves analyzing four Chinese films from 1991-2006: *Wohu Canglong* (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon), *Huang Feihong* (Once Upon a Time in China), *Huo Yuanjia* (Fearless), and *Yingxiong* (Hero). I selected these films because of their broad diversity. Each film was headed by a different director. Ang Lee, a Taiwanese filmmaker, directed *Wohu Canglong*; Tsui Hark, a Hong Kong filmmaker, directed *Huang Feihong*; Ronny Yu, a Hong Kong filmmaker educated in the United States, directed *Fearless*; and Zhang Yimou, a member of the Beijing Film Academy fifth-generation, directed *Yingxiong*. With the exception of *Wohu Canglong*, these films saw solid box office receipts in China. Yet, *Wohu Canglong* was the only 'blockbuster' film internationally released (grossing over $100 million) while other films fared decently (except *Huang Feihong* that failed in the U.S. market). Although these films were created by directors from varied backgrounds and geographic regions, they all share certain commonalities. Each film addresses the themes of nationalism, gender, and *zhiji* (recognition of worth). Moreover, these films all present an imagined community which constructs the idea of 'Chineseness,' or what it means to be Chinese. Three of the films offer mythologized interpretations of historical accounts. These films do not focus on historical accuracy or fidelity to the historical personages. Therefore, I will focus on how Chinese directors use notions of masculinity, nationalism, and the martial hero ideal of *zhiji* (知己) embedded within genre to convey a particular message about their idealized mythic present. Tsui Hark's *Huang Feihong (Once Upon a Time in China)* addresses an eponymous historical figure who was a proponent of Chinese martial arts as a means of strengthening China's global position in the face of the Unequal Treaties, modernization,

and colonization. In the film, a historical, local hero figure is reconfigured as a nationalist presence whose liminality and negotiation of boundaries, both spatial and temporal, reflects anxieties of the 1997 reacquisition of Hong Kong and deeper sentiments about what it means to be Chinese. Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong (Hero)* uses Sima Qian's historical account of the attempted assassination of the first Chinese emperor to explore notions of identity which again confronts boundary negotiation. Ronny Yu's *Huo Yuanjia (Fearless)* presents a nostalgic rendering of a historical local hero who, like Huang Feihong, saw Chinese martial arts as a vehicle for strengthening China's global position. Yu's interpretation of the Huo Yuanjia historical story uses similar strategies of historic appropriation and reinterpretation in order to reflect contemporary anxieties. The fourth film, Ang Lee's *Wohu Canglong (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon),* is divergent for several reasons. Primarily, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is based on a novel rather than on a historical figure or account. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is also different in that it is the one film under consideration which does not star Li Lianjie (Jet Li).

The first theme of these films which I will examine is gender. Li Lianjie is the star of *Huang Feihong*, *Huo Yuanjia*, and *Yingxiong* for a reason. Not only is Li a national *wushu* (martial arts) champion, thus ideally suited for intense martial arts scenes, he is also a projection of a specific gender identity which is linked to the mythology of these films. Li's face functions as a signifier which is linked to specific notions of identity. Chow Yunfat, the star of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* presents a different vision of masculinity. Each film deals with notions of gender identity, however, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the only film which substantially explores a feminist understanding of

identity while the Li Lianjie films largely focus on masculine identity. As Judith Butler has noted, "gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 33). As I will demonstrate below, in the Li Lianjie films, the male protagonists each share certain gendered characteristics which help shape the idea of Chinese identity. Li's characters each exist within finely structured systems of action. Confucian, Daoist, and *wuxia* traditions each inform the performed gender roles expected of these characters. In *Yingxiong*, the emperor cannot believe Wuming's red narrative because the characters in that particular subplot do not adhere to the rules of conduct within the *wuxia* tradition. Huang Feihong's relationship with Aunt Thirteen is complicated because of Huang's performance of the proper Confucian relation hierarchy, a hierarchy which is inverted and ridiculed by Aunt Thirteen's crossdressing. Huo Yuanjia's transgression against Confucian hierarchy and the *wuxia* principles of *zhiji* (recognition of worth) lead to terrible loss. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* explores the idea of performance from the visual dance-like choreography of the bamboo duel to the explicit gender role reversals in which Jiaolong engages. Moreover, Li Mubai's relationship with Xiulian illustrates how much influence existing structures of cultural hierarchy - Confucian, Buddhist, *wuxia* - govern interaction. Within the scope of 'Chineseness' offered by very different directors, the performative nature of identity is always an underlying concern.

The second theme I will examine is how nationalism is performed. Gender identity is linked to concepts of national identity. The protagonists of the Li Lianjie films are negotiating national identity from a liminal perspective. Each character is placed

between nations. Wuming of *Yingxiong* travels between the Zhou and Qin kingdoms and faces the transition from kingdom to empire. Huang Feihong and Huo Yuanjia both face European colonization of China - through treaty ports- and the ending of the Qing empire.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is less explicit in exploring national boundaries; however, the movements from the capital to the west desert as well as the journey to Wudang Mountain reflect a diasporic, transnational China captured in both the broad filming sites and the cast. Liminality and boundary crossing serves as a motif of these films which reflects contemporary anxieties over the politics of place. Where China fits within the global network, what Taiwan and Hong Kong's relationships with mainland China are and should be, and the 'Chineseness' of diasporic ethnic Chinese people are all reflected in these films. These concerns can only be addressed within the framework of performative identity. Interestingly, these films do not offer heroes performing specifically nationalistic roles. Rather, as I will show below, the characters adhere to the idealized concept of *tianxia* (天下), or all under heaven, thus suggesting that Chinese identity transcends specific national affiliation with a more universal notion of 'Chineseness.' *Tianxia* suggests that being Chinese is being part of a unified whole. Unlike *Zhongguo* (中國) which has specific geographical connotations, *tianxia* allows for a broader vision of what it means to be Chinese: as Benedict Anderson has noted, the concept of nation is imaginative and here the idea of what constitutes 'Chineseness' is an imagined community which supercedes bordered nationalism (Anderson 6).

The third theme I will explore is the function of *zhiji* (知己), or recognition of worth, and how *wuxia* heroes perform their expected roles within the martial film genre. As with gender, the cultural codes of *wuxia* and Confucianism are prescribed, performative acts. Heroes perform a specific cultural function because they "belong to the fantasy of a primal origin, a mythical beginning that is nowhere to be found except in our 'minds' and 'hearts.' Submitting to the power of such heroes produces a gratifying self-image" (Chow 1995: 33). *Wuxia* heroes are expected to perform in a specific manner bound up with their proper gendered performances; in a way analogous to Barthes' analysis of Western professional wrestling, "the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him" (Barthes 16). Martial heroes and professional wrestlers both are expected to perform their specific roles, with the outcome being less important than the performative nature of the event. Identity is formulated as much by adherence to cultural codes of conduct as the imagined community of nationalism. This identity is not always harmonious. Christopher Hamm notes that "personal loyalty is perhaps the most deeply held value of the Chinese people; it is at the heart of the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, yet has often stood in opposition to the moral codes imposed by the ruling stratum of society" (Hamm 202). Personal loyalty is reflected in the concept of *zhiji* (知己) or truly knowing the inner self of another person and recognizing their value. *Zhiji* encompasses the personal loyalty, which Hamm discusses in his study of Jin Yong's martial arts novels, and often creates situations where loyalty to the one who knows yourself conflicts with other acceptable societal codes. Thus, *wuxia* codes of conduct (including *zhiji*) are, like gender and nation,

idealized and performed. Roland Barthes notes that "What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction" (Barthes 25). *Wuxia* heroes, like Barthes' professional wrestlers, function within a perfomative matrix in which signification is clarified. The performative acts of the characters in each of these films serve to construct an idealized circumstance in which the character transparently corresponds to gendered, social, and national roles.

Whether through gender, nation, or genre, these films construct a politics of identity reflecting an idealized China. Each film shows a mythological Chinese history where the anxieties and ideals of the directors are transposed onto a historical moment. Often the mythic message is structurally coded into the film via visual narration techniques - most notable in Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong*. In each film, the place of Chinese identity within a transnational, globalizing world is examined and idealized. In *Huang Feihong*, "Tsui depicts the mythic world of the martial arts as a time when China's sciences and inventions were at their peak. This notion of Chinese science and military prowess combined with the popular mythologising of the martial arts form the substance of Tsui's nationalist theme (Teo 1997: 163). Notably the China presented is, for these films, always a mythologized historical moment and this moment is subject to strict censorship. Jerome Silbergeld notes that “layer upon layer of negotiated self-censorship is required before, during, and after shooting a film, generating art by committee(s), and

requiring of film-makers subtlety and subterfuge in the formulation of any dissenting social critique" (Silbergeld 55). Chinese directors present contemporary politics as allegory, incorporating a strategy which allows a certain amount of content to bypass censorship and for the power of a mythic message to imprint the directors' visions of an imagined 'Chineseness' onto the audience.

CHAPTER 2

ANG LEE'S TRANSNATIONAL PROJECT

As the one film under consideration which does not star Jet Li, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can serve as a foundation and foil for the other films. A film about identity and coming of age, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is created out of a transnational Chinese diaspora. The cast and crew come from different parts of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and North America. Interestingly this film presents an imagined China which is both similar to and much different from the China presented in the three Jet Li films. The visual images and dialogue narrative are both straightforward. Ang Lee is not working against the same domestic censorship strictures as Hong Kong or mainland Chinese directors and the film is aimed at an international market (Bordwell 127). Ang Lee presents a mythologized China troubled in terms of gender and codes of conduct. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* offers a unique mythologized China. Ang Lee's "conceptualization of the film as a dream of a China 'that probably never existed'" reflects a nostalgia not for a China of yesteryear but a hope for a better China, politically and culturally (Chan 7). Lee's political and cultural vision is strongly couched in gendered terms.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon revolves around the coming of age of Jiaolong (Jen) who resists performing her expected gender role. The two female leads, Jiaolong

and Xiulian are both martial arts masters. The prime narrative struggle is the contest between these two characters for control of Li Mubai's sword, the Green Destiny. Jiaolong is the daughter of an aristocrat and on the brink of marriage. Jiaolong's skill with calligraphy illustrates her education and during the day, she presents the facade of a proper young lady. However, at night, Jiaolong transgresses her expected gender position. For the early conflicts in the film she steals the sword and faces Xiulian while dressed in gender-neutral attire. Later, after stealing the sword a second time and running away, Jiaolong travels again dressed in masculine attire. It is not until she pronounces herself as the Desert Goddess while fighting in the inn that the martial heroes become completely sure of her gender; her self-coding as a 'goddess' disrupts the assumption that she is a young man. Continuing this theme, in the extended flashback desert scene, Xiaohu (Lo) steals Jiaolong's comb and rides off into the desert. Jiaolong abandons her mother, takes a horse and spear, and rides after in pursuit. In pursuing Xiaohu, she is relentless and violent. She fires arrows, stabs with a spear, and eventually engages in melee combat. In combat, Jiaolong is largely unstoppable. She faces an entire inn full of martial heroes and easily defeats all of them. In Xiaohu's bandit camp, Jiaolong takes on several men simultaneously and defeats them as well. Only two people prove to be more capable than Jiaolong: Xiulian and Li Mubai.

Xiulian, like Jiaolong, is a strong, martial figure who exists outside the standard expected gender roles. However, the two are presented as mirrors. Xiulian operates a renowned security and transportation service and commands several men. Jiaolong is the daughter of a noble with no independence. Xiulian is a martial expert who stands guard

over the Green Destiny. Jiaolong learned her martial arts in secret and seeks to steal the Green Destiny. Xiulian is not married, does not dress in proper feminine attire, and her hands are rough and calloused from practicing with weapons. Jiaolong is engaged to be married, wears sophisticated court dresses and hairpieces, and practices calligraphy. Xiulian deglamorizes the *jianghu (*江湖) lifestyle trying to dissuade Jiaolong from flouting her expected gender performance while Jiaolong struggles to escape into the mythic *jianghu*. *Jianghu* refers to an often fictional environment in which classical *wuxia* stories are set and stems from the novel, *Water Margin*. Xiulian exhibits masculine traits when Jiaolong steals the Green Destiny. In a scene which mirrors Jiaolong's pursuit of Xiaohu, Xiulian pursues Jiaolong relentlessly to recover the Green Destiny, chasing her across rooftops much as Jiaolong chased Xiaohu to recover her comb. Xiulian is dominant in each encounter with Jiaolong. She quickly infers that Jiaolong is the thief, confirms her suspicion, and is only deterred from defeating Jiaolong by interruption by Jade Fox or pity for Jiaolong.

Jade Fox is the third prominent female figure in the film. Her role is almost completely gender subversive. Jade Fox's underlying motivation is revenge against gender performance. She was denied access to the martial secrets of *Wudang* (武儅) because of her sex, so she poisoned her lover, Li Mubai's master, and stole the *Wudang* manual. She rejects the concept of traditional marriage and encourages Jiaolong to leave behind family and marriage to wander the *Jianghu* together. Jade Fox's relationship with Jiaolong is subversive since she claims "*Wo wei yi de qin, wo wei yi de chou* (我唯一的親，我唯一的仇) or My only relation, My only enemy." These claims underlay the

importance of Jade Fox as a transgressive figure: she seeks to literally supplant Jiaolong's parents and family: Jade Fox considers Jiaolong to be her only relative, a proxy daughter to be mothered, taught, and raised as her own.

Each of the female characters must balance expectation with reality. Jade Fox performs the role of an exemplary senior maid in the Yu household to hide her identity. However, she ultimately rejects normative gender through her relations with Southern Crane and her criminal behavior. The fact that Jade Fox is a woman is remarked upon with surprise in the film, punctuating how deviant Jade Fox's performance of gender is within the cultural frame. Xiulian supports Jiaolong's marriage and entry into normative gender roles. Further, she performs the role of the chaste widow despite her desire for Li Mubai. Jiaolong is polarized. She rejects expected gender roles in various ways, including cross-dressing, aggressive pursuit, violent behavior, and running away from her marriage. Yet, she also performs certain roles as expected. She turns to Xiulian for 'proper attire' after her cross-dressed battle in the inn. Despite her pursuit of Xiaohu and violence towards him, she eventually falls into the role of his lover with several scenes depicting an emulated normative gender dynamic, despite the transgressive nature of her being with someone her parents do not approve of. Each of the main female characters in the film is strong, possesses masculine traits, and negotiates a line between performing and rejecting expected female gender roles. Femininity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is neither completely dominant nor completely submissive in relation to masculinity.

Masculinity in the film is also complicated. The three central male figures each present a complicated image of gender. Master Bo is a comical and interesting character. He mirrors Xiulian in that he also tracks down the thief, stands as a guardian of the Green Destiny, accompanies Li Mubai on the journey to Xiulian's security firm's headquarters, and faces Jade Fox in battle. Master Bo appears to present a typical masculine figure. Yet his masculinity is troubled. Master Bo wields excessively large, phallic weapons yet he is constantly tripping over himself and his only notable role in combat is to get in the way. He fails to protect the Green Destiny and is denied the ability to pursue the thief. Moreover, when he dines with the Inspector, Mei's quick chopsticks deny him first dip into the hot pot. Likewise, after the death of the Inspector, he stands guard over Mei. Mei performs the aggressive role by inviting Master Bo inside and Bo initially resists, but ultimately succumbs. Bo attempts to perform the roles expected of a man yet fails in virtually every regard. Interestingly, Bo strongly resembles Li Mubai physically (the actor has similar facial features and build) while mirroring him performatively. Bo even mirrors Li Mubai sartorially, wearing black robes to Li Mubai's white.

Li Mubai is the central male figure in the film whose sword is the object of desire for both Jiaolong and Xiulian. Reading the Green Destiny as a phallic object gives a situation where Li Mubai is a castrated figure. He gives away his phallus, his phallus is fought over by two women, and when his phallus is returned, he realizes how much he missed it and declares it must be used one last time to penetrate Jade Fox. Ironically, while Broken Sword of *Yingxiong* is not an emasculated figure, despite his name, one

reading is that Li Mubai is presented as emasculated. Li Mubai's only martial prowess is displayed against Jiaolong. He is able to easily defeat her and chooses to use sheathed swords and sticks in his battles. Li Mubai performs his expected role by defeating Jiaolong. Yet, when he slays Jade Fox, he is simultaneously defeated. Li Mubai, like Bo, is ineffectual. He cannot engage in his desired relationship with Xiulian, he cannot control his sword, and at the brink of death he cannot transcend.

The third male figure is Xiaohu. Xiaohu, like Li Mubai and Bo, attempts to fulfill his expected gender roles but ultimately fails. Xiaohu tells Jiaolong that he will come after her once he has entered into normal society and respectably established himself. Yet, he is unable to gain any legitimacy because of his bandit reputation. When Xiaohu sneaks into Jiaolong's bedchamber, he is rejected by her and leaves. When he arrives to stop Jiaolong's wedding, he again is ineffectual, requiring rescue and intercession by Xiulian. Xiaohu is then exiled to *Wudang* and becomes completely peripheral.

Gender is not the only site which is troubled in the film. Each of the characters is bound up by societal codes of conduct. These codes are a combination of Confucian customs, Buddhist morals, and *wuxia* honor. Identity becomes troubled by adherence to or transgression of these codes, while gender functions as part of these codes. Clashes between expectations of these codes of conduct have trapped Li Mubai. First, as a Buddhist, he seeks to transcend the material world and attain enlightenment. His meditations are problematic and when he reaches the place which should bring enlightenment, he is held back by his desire for Xiulian. As he dies, he rejects transcendence in order to profess his love for Xiulian. Li Mubai's love for Xiulian also

transgresses the codes of conduct for martial heroes. Li Mubai is a sworn brother of Xiulian's fiancé and under the strictures of a Confucian morality, Li Mubai must distance himself from Xiulian because it is her obligation to be a chaste widow. Li Mubai cannot violate his obligation to his martial brother nor can he violate the moral expectation which traps Xiulian. However, he ultimately does transgress these codes precisely when his transgression is meaningless. Li Mubai professes his love for Xiulian with his last breath, violating his Buddhist disavowal of the material, his Confucian respect for a chaste widow, and his martial hero obligation to his sworn brother. Yet, despite the severity of transgression, his profession of love is an empty act because nothing can come of it. Li Mubai upholds the codes he is bound to during life and only transgresses them at the moment when propriety no longer matters. Li Mubai most closely resembles Huang Feihong. Both are bound by multiple codes of conduct despite their desire. Both transgress the codes for that desire. Yet, Huang Feihong's transgression is not empty: he saves Aunt Thirteen from rape and slavery. Li Mubai simply expresses his feelings and dies.

Ang Lee's ambiguous ending precludes a simple reading of the film's final events. With the emphasis on legend and Jiaolong's leap from *Wudang* mountain the question becomes: what was her wish? Does she share Xiaohu's dream of returning to the desert together? Considering her contrition and desperate attempt to create an antidote, does she wish to undo the death of Li Mubai? Lee's ambiguous ending creates a space in which the audience can inscribe their own interpretation. If Jiaolong were to wish to undo Li Mubai's death, then his transgression of behavioral codes ceases to feel hollow and would

have a chance at being substantial. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* addresses the themes of gender, nation, and genre codes without offering easy conclusions. The transnational scope of the film, the blurred gender roles, and conflicted portrayal of codes of conduct explore questions of contemporary identity through a mythic, nostalgic China. These complex issues reflect a "cultural anxiety about representation and identity, particularly about what it means to be Chinese in the context of the Asian 'invasion' of Hollywood" (Chan 3). The issues - gender, nationalism, and governing codes - are also present in the three Jet Li films, yet each film explores these issues differently, sometimes in ways parallel to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and sometimes in ways substantially different.

CHAPTER 3

GENDER MATTERS

The previous chapter focused on *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* to discuss the interrelated issues of gender, nationalism, and *zhiji*. This chapter will examine Jet Li's performance of gender in *Huo Yuanjia, Huang Feihong*, and *Yingxiong*. These films present gender themes in connected ways. Each film explores Chinese identity through allusions to the 'sick man of Asia' (explicitly in *Huo Yuanjia*). Each film suggests the emasculated Chinese male figure. Huo Yuanjia is assassinated by the Japanese, Huang Feihong stands in contrast to the emasculated Chinese government, and Wuming is strip-searched and placed in subordination to Qin.

Ronny Yu's *Huo Yuanjia* deals with the theme of emasculation. The eponymous character played by Jet Li must experience complete destruction of his identity, losing his family, his lifestyle, his home, his queue, and his martial prowess. Huo Yuanjia is the only character in any of the films to be completely emasculated. The film does not leave Huo Yuanjia in this identity-less, emasculated state, however; Huo Yuanjia is rescued by minority peasants from a countryside village and nursed back to health. One of the peasants, Yueci, is blind; however, she recognizes the inherent value of Huo Yuanjia. Huo Yuanjia begins to gain his identity through Yueci's recognition. Recognition of value, *zhiji*, is a pivotal martial hero genre trope, and as Huo Yuanjia learns from the

farmers, he also becomes a true martial hero. His rebirth among the peasants is crucial to the narrative of the film, despite having no apparent basis in the historical figure.

The links between Yueci and Huo Yuanjia go beyond Yueci's recognition of Huo Yuanjia's worth. Yueci tells Huo Yuanjia a story of how when she was thirteen, her eyesight became cloudy and eventually she could no longer see. Yueci expressed her sorrow for her loss through crying; however, her grandmother told her that crying is fine but that living must continue after the crying ends (人心里不好受，就得哭。哭完了，你還得上路: *ren xin li bu hao shou, jiu dei ku. Ku wan le, ni hai dei shang lu*). Yueci's story serves both to comfort Huo Yuanjia and to highlight their similarities. Huo Yuanjia is also portrayed as being approximately thirteen when he sees his father lose a *wushu* match and becomes obsessed with competition. Huo Yuanjia, like Yueci, was blinded and lost sight of the world. Huo Yuanjia, mirroring Yueci, is able to move beyond crying and continue living. When Yueci's grandmother reminds Yueci that it is time to honor her ancestors, Huo Yuanjia realizes how unfilial he has been. He decides to leave the village in order to pay his respects to the graves of his family. Huo Yuanjia promises Yueci that he will return to see her again. He fulfills this promise in death returning to the hill above the village where he practiced wushu while convalescing. This scene substantiates the link between Huo Yuanjia and Yueci because as she runs up the hill towards him she is not gazing blindly, but rather, her eyes are focused on him. In the shot-reverse shot sequence he looks at her and she looks at him. She smiles, a tear runs down her cheek, and her eyes look at him. Her ability to see Huo Yuanjia transcends her blindness and his death, placing their relationship within the *yuanyang* 鴛鴦 (mandarin

duck) tradition of martial heroes: they are two halves of a whole unit; a matched pair that, much like ducks, mate for life and cannot be separated.

While Jet Li was a logical choice to star in *Huo Yuanjia,* it is very intriguing that Tsui Hark did not select a different actor for the role of Huang Feihong. According to David Bordwell "genres demand character types, so stars must to some degree match fixed roles" (Bordwell 157). Huang Feihong had a long history of depiction in film and Jet Li offered quite a different portrayal, playing "Wong Fei-hung as a youngish Chinese gentleman apparently open to Western ideas and concepts though remaining a staunch patriot and nationalist" (Teo 2009: 63). As a mainland Chinese, Jet Li was an interesting choice for a film dealing with the anxiety over the upcoming 1997 reunification of Hong Kong with mainland China as well as with notions of 'Chineseness.' Tsui Hark could have cast Chow Yun-fat, who by 1991 had a prolific film career and vast local popularity. Tsui Hark may have decided that he did not want to tone down the complex, fast-paced *gongfu* sequences in order to accommodate Chow, who is not a martial artist, despite the fact that "purists complained that Jet Li's northern *wushu* style hardly prepared him to portray Cantonese kung-fu heroes like Huang Feihong" (Bordwell 208). Yet, other factors seem to be involved. In the film, Huang Feihong, when speaking with the Black Flag general, refers to *Tianxia* （天下）, the same imagined Chinese community which transcends political specificity as was referenced in *Yingxiong*. Jet Li represents a specific vision of masculinity which unites *Yingxiong, Huang Feihong*, and *Huo Yunanjia*. Huang Feihong opens with a dialogue between Huang and the general of the Black Flag army. The general gives Huang his ceremonial fan which has the unequal treaties written on it.

He tells Huang that he hopes each of the treaties will be erased by the time he returns from Vietnam. During the burning of Po Chi Lam (寶芝林), Huang's medical clinic and martial arts school, Aunt Thirteen drops the general's fan. Afterwards, Huang opens the fan with a look of horror discovering that the wording of the unequal treaties remains but the small map of China has been disintegrated and the title has changed from "unequal treaties" to "equal treaties" (不平等條約 [*bu ping deng tiao yue*] becomes 平等條約 [*ping deng tiao yue*]).

Huang Feihong is the exemplar of Tsui Hark's vision of Chinese masculinity. Huang Feihong is physically fit, handsome, youthful and energetic, and wields superhuman martial powers. Further, Huang Feihong abides by strict Confucian codes of conduct. His relationship with Aunt Thirteen is complicated by the fact that she has the senior position in the relationship: she is not his blood aunt, yet he insists on treating her as an aunt. Huang Feihong is a celibate figure desiring Aunt Thirteen yet resistant to the relationship. Celibacy "as a characteristic of the martial arts genre stems from the Buddhist practice of abstinence being one of the pillars reinforcing the moral foundation of the martial artist hero" (Teo 2009: 69). Huang Feihong is defined by his celibacy and "perhaps even more than the nationalism, the characteristic of Wong as a celibate hero is an important indicator of the shared heritage of *wuxia* and kung fu" (Teo 2009: 68). Huang Feihong is therefore situated strongly within a patriarchal system in which the codes which he is honor-bound to follow conflict with his gendered desire for Aunt Thirteen. Further, when Huang Feihong is repeatedly and unjustly impugned and

arrested by the yamen, he orders his students to comply. For Huang Feihong, there are laws in China and he will not scoff at those laws. Huang Feihong works tirelessly within the law to find justice but will normally not break laws. Huang Feihong's relationship with Aunt Thirteen, however, complicates Huang Feihong's staunch adherence to law at the end of the film. In addition to being bound by Confucian codes of conduct, Huang Feihong also is subject to the martial hero order. Much like Li Mubai of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* Huang Feihong is torn between his feelings and his duty. Li Mubai had to suppress his feelings for Xiulian because of his loyalty to his sworn brother. Huang Feihong is cast in one of the martial traditions as an asexual figure whose martial prowess and enlightened state transcend sexual desire. Just as Li Mubai struggles with his loyalty, Huang Feihong struggles with both his role as martial master and Confucian hierarchy.

What is most interesting about Huang Feihong and Aunt Thirteen's relationship is the fact that they are opposites. Huang Feihong is a traditional, Confucian male steeped in the martial tradition. Aunt Thirteen, in contrast, is a woman who is educated in the West, dresses in Western clothes and is obsessed with Western technology. As the film progresses, Huang Feihong slowly adopts aspects of Western technology: he uses guns and bullets; he wears a strawboater and sunglasses as a disguise; he ultimately assents to wearing a Western suit; and he submits to having his photo taken. As the narrative progresses, Huang Feihong moves away from being completely steeped in tradition and towards a hybrid identity which mixes traditional China and modern technology. Aunt Thirteen, conversely, shifts in the opposite direction. Early in the film she is only seen wearing Western dresses and hats and using a camera. Then, when measuring Huang

Feihong for a Western-style suit, she wears Chinese female dress, underscoring the gender roles the two are portraying. Later, she wears male Chinese clothing in response to Huang Feihong's harangue. Finally, after she is kidnapped and held with the prostitutes, Aunt Thirteen wears more traditional Chinese clothing.

Huang Feihong and Aunt Thirteen's relationship complicates the issue of masculinity through Aunt Thirteen's obsession with images. Aunt Thirteen's photography raises several issues. First, her obsession with the camera makes Huang Feihong the object of her desiring gaze (Mulvey 10). Second, her camera obsession functions symbolically as a Westernizing presence. What is intriguing is the result of the Western gaze on traditional Chinese culture. When Aunt Thirteen first sets up a shot of a traditional caged bird, she uses too much flash powder and the bird, a metonymic figure for Chinese tradition, is burned. At the opera, Aunt Thirteen sets up a shot which results in Foon falling off the roof; again her view of China through the Western lens is damaging. The third major photograph comes as Po Chi Lam is burning. Two key features of that scene are important. First, Aunt Thirteen allows the general's fan to burn because securing the safety of her Western lens is more important to her than respecting the general. Second, Aunt Thirteen stops in the midst of the chaos to snap a photo of the burning buildings. The final key photography scene comes at the end of the film where Aunt Thirteen sets up a family portrait-style picture with herself, Huang Feihong, and the key students from Po Chi Lam. Right as the photograph is snapped, chaos ensues and everyone is turned away from the camera. Regardless of the context in which Aunt Thirteen uses her camera, the resulting chaos is the same. Her Western gaze

metaphorically destroys Chinese tradition (the bird and Po Chi Lam) while at the same time injuring or disrupting Chinese life (Foon and the family portrait).

Aunt Thirteen's gaze is also gender-coded. Aunt Thirteen asks Huang Feihong to let her measure him for a Western suit. While doing so, Aunt Thirteen manipulates the shadows they are casting on the wall to create the illusion that she is caressing Huang Feihong. When she leans in to take a measurement, Huang Feihong mistakenly thinks she has moved in for a kiss and panics. The scene is crucial because it highlights two key aspects of the film. First, Aunt Thirteen takes on the role of the masculine gazer. She is the photographer who frames shots. She manipulates shadows to create a scene which appeals to her. Aunt Thirteen's placement of Huang Feihong into a voyeuristic frame could easily be read as a role-reversal where Huang Feihong is emasculated by being the object of a desiring gaze (Mulvey 11). However, Tsui Hark explicitly links masculinity and national identity by showing precisely how Huang Feihong is not emasculated in the film.

A recurring theme in *Huang Feihong* is queue cutting. In each instance where a queue is cut, the person whose hair is shortened is represented as emasculated. Bucktooth So cuts his queue after his inability to save a patient because he was unable to read Chinese characters. Bucktooth So is viewed by himself and others as not being Chinese, and by cutting off his queue, he embraces his otherness. Iron Vest Yim cuts off his opponent's queue during a duel, reducing his opponent to an animalistic caricature: growling and lashing out wildly, having lost control over his martial prowess. A later parallel scene finds Iron Vest Yim being reduced to an animalistic status, also growling

and flailing wildly, when Huang Feihong cuts off Iron Vest Yim's queue. Despite the fact that the queue was a mark of servitude to foreign Manchu conquerors, Tsui Hark chose to embrace the queue as a mark of 'Chineseness' and specifically of Chinese masculinity. Huang Feihong is specifically not emasculated during the film, despite being the object of desire, because his queue is not cut. He retains his masculinity while depriving Iron Vest Yim of his.

Huang Feihong's masculinity comes in direct conflict with his adherence to Confucian ideals when he is placed in prison. The guards come to free Huang Feihong because of their respect for him and they know that Huang has been unjustly framed and imprisoned. However, Huang Feihong refuses to leave because he must adhere to legal structures. Yet, when news arrives that Aunt Thirteen has been kidnapped and is being held hostage by the American Mr. Jackson, Huang Feihong immediately leaves the prison. By coming to the rescue of Aunt Thirteen, Huang Feihong abandons Confucian codes of conduct. Huang Feihong allows his feelings for Aunt Thirteen (a relationship which is forbidden under Confucian hierarchical rules) to impel him to leave the prison (thus undermining the rule of law). Huang Feihong's desire for Aunt Thirteen is underscored in the jail by a short scene in which flickering shadows from the jailer's torches reminds Huang Feihong of Aunt Thirteen carrying a candle in Po Chi Lam. While Li Mubai remained trapped by his feelings for Xiulian and his only manifestation was to die as a lingering ghost, Huang Feihong is able to allow his desire to overcome his Confucian mores. Huang Feihong's masculine desire for Aunt Thirteen becomes the most important of many motivating forces. Huang Feihong's

masculinity, therefore, is less tragic than that of Li Mubai who can only allow his feelings to take precedence as he lies dying.

Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong* (*Hero*) clearly explores gender through the medium of visual narrative. The dialogue and the visual imagery often diverge as signifying systems. What is crucial in the construction of visual narrative (film, photography, memory, history) is not the pronouncement of facts. Since narrative is inherently unreliable, the truth is not unquestionably revealed. As Foucault puts it, “discourse transmits and produces power” (Foucalt 101). All narrative has power whether it continues to propagate a dominant historical paradigm or attempts to deconstruct existing power structures through utilizing alternate frames such as subaltern voices. According to Jeffrey Olick, “history if written by people in the present for particular purposes, and the selection of ‘sources’ are always arbitrary, if ‘experience,’ moreover is always embedded in and occurs through narrative frames, then there is no primal, unmediated experience that can be recovered” (Olick 110). In other words pure, objective truth does not exist within the confines of narrative. Yet for *wuxia* films, "history is an interminable feature and characteristic of the genre and of Chinese literary culture in general. This pre-eminence of history has a 'quasi-religious' ring to it" (Teo 2009: 7). Although history is central to *wuxia* films, such history is both mythologized and mediated.

In the film *Yingxiong*, the point of interest is not the historical accuracy nor the narratives given by Qin and Wuming; the importance is the power relationship between Qin and Wuming, which shifts, and their combined construction of a Chinese martial identity. Chris Berry’s claim (see Berry 166) that Nameless (Wuming) is emasculated by

Qin is undermined by Wuming's potential for following through with the assassination: up to the very end of the film Wuming retains thoughts of revenge. This is shown by the flickering candles: the movement of the candles' flames is a physical manifestation of Wuming's intention to harm Qin. Further, Wuming is not emasculated symbolically during the strip search because his power transcends physical armament: Wuming plans to take Qin's sword for the assassination. Wuming needs no external visible phallic symbol to maintain his masculinity. Only after Wuming recognizes the worth of Broken Sword and Qin (*zhiji*) does he give up revenge. Broken Sword's concept of *tianxia* and its relationship to Qin's project are the defining element in changing Wuming's mind.

Much like Wuming, Broken Sword is a character who also retains his masculinity, giving his name an ironic tone. As Qin points out, not even three thousand palace guards could stop Broken Sword from entering the palace and attempting an assassination. Further, in the green narrative, where Broken Sword constructs his own narrative to Wuming, Broken Sword strikes Qin yet chooses not to make the blow fatal. Both Wuming and Broken Sword have the opportunity and power to eliminate Qin yet choose not to. Broken Sword chooses to respond to the ideal of *tianxia* in a supportive rather than resistant manner. Resistance is not the only means of creating power or identity and Broken Sword finds the greater goal of a unified China to be more important than revenge. Broken Sword recognizes the value of Qin in the *zhiji* tradition. Broken Sword understands that Qin's desire to unify China will result in a greater emphasis on *tianxia* or a greater, imagined Chinese community. Even if Qin's methods are violent and involve the eradication of Zhou and the other states, what is important is that the unified

concept of *tianxia* China will remain after Qin's (or any other's) governance has passed. For Broken Sword, this is the crucial moment where state identity must give way to the emergence of a greater, imagined Chinese identity.

CHAPTER 4

NATIONALISM

Nation is a significant recurring theme in these films. Each film addresses nationalism in its own way. *Huo Yuanjia* offers an overt nationalism which is directly constructed in opposition to foreign colonialism. *Huang Feihong* similarly addresses concerns with colonialism but also adds the anxieties of the 1997 reunification of Hong Kong with the mainland. *Yingxiong* explores the concept of China being something greater than that which is inscribed by geographic or nationalist boundaries. For Zhang Yimou, nation becomes the site of transnational, diasporic 'Chineseness,' a cultural construct which is fabricated by Chinese literary and artistic traditions. This fusion of tradition and nation is also seen in *Huo Yuanjia* through visual emphasis on calligraphy and writing, and in *Huang Feihong*, through the caged bird and traditional medicine.

After the destruction of Huo Yuanjia's life in *Huo Yuanjia*, a transformation occurs. During the second and third phases of the film, Yuanjia reconstructs his identity and ultimately becomes a martial hero. He fixes what is wrong with his masculinity and with his nationalism. While recovering in the peasant village, Huo Yuanjia learns to discard his competitiveness. When first tasked with planting rice, Huo Yuanjia reverts to his old self and has to plant faster than the other farmers. The result is a mess which must be fixed by Yueci. Huo Yuanjia also fails to enjoy the wind while planting. The other

farmers pause when the wind blows, closing their eyes and enjoying the breeze. Huo Yuanjia eventually learns to accept the wind as he constructs his identity among the farmers. Huo Yuanjia's acceptance of the wind illustrates another aspect of identity formation within the film. When Huo Yuanjia is fighting for the sake of winning, he traduces the three major philosophical traditions of China: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Huo Yuanjia is an unfilial son and a careless parent. His family suffers and dies because of his rebelliousness and lack of propriety. Huo Yuanjia does not understand the Dao. He fights constantly and continuously seeks out the next competition. Because of his drive, he is overly sensitive to slights and quick to embrace revenge. Huo Yuanjia also implicitly rejects Buddhism through his killing of Chin. Chin sports a shaved head, monk's beard, and wears attire similar to a monk's. Further, Chin carries rosary beads which are prominently displayed in two scenes: the introductory shots and the birthday celebration scene.

As part of his reconstructed identity, Huo Yuanjia recognizes that he has failed. As time passes, he is able to stand in the rice paddy with the other farmers and accept the wind; rather than fighting it, he accepts the flow of energy and the rhythm of the farmers who he begins to work with rather than against. He remembers that he has failed as a filial son and desires to return to his family gravesite to honor his parents. He burns incense and asks forgiveness from his parents and his daughter. Huo Yuanjia integrates the Chinese philosophical traditions which he had previously rejected into his life and after doing so is then able to transition from personal identity to national identity.

Huo Yuanjia also shows he has learned to respect life, which is illustrated when a challenge is issued from Hercules O'Brien to any 'sick man of Asia' to fight him. Huo Yuanjia wants to face O'Brien because he is no longer the 'sick man of Asia,' having overcome both his physical ailments and his identity crisis, and he wishes to prove that China is also no longer 'sick.' He asks Jinsun for money to travel to Shanghai for a fight. Jinsun is offended until he learns of O'Brien's challenge. Then he decides to fund Huo Yuanjia.

Jinsun is important throughout the film for several reasons. He is Huo Yuanjia's oldest friend and his one true 'brother' in the martial sense. Jinsun is also a hybrid identity. He transitions through the film from wearing Qing-style clothing to sporting Western suits. He drinks coffee because he claims China must learn how the Western powers became powerful. He is loyal to Huo Yuanjia despite Huo Yuanjia's failings. Most critically, Jinsun denounces Huo Yuanjia's competitiveness. He does not support Huo Yuanjia fighting other Chinese. For Jinsun, China's weakness comes from in-fighting: the antithesis of the imagined community of *tianxia*. When Huo Yuanjia reveals his intention to face foreign challenges, Jinsun decides to back him fully. Jinsun recognizes that Huo Yuanjia has changed for the better and the improvement, for Jinsun, is that Huo Yuanjia has attained a level of national consciousness.

When Huo Yuanjia eventually accepts a challenge from the foreign concessions, he is invited to a meeting with the Japanese fighter. The meeting is a chance for the two fighters to assess each other's character. Significantly, the scene is framed around tea. The Japanese fighter, Tanaka, prepares tea for Huo Yuanjia in a symbolic tea ceremony.

The tea ceremony is symbolic because it represents tradition yet does not follow the formal aspects of a proper tea ceremony. Tanaka simply steeps leaves. Their conversation illustrates Huo Yuanjia's new identity. Tanaka wants to demonstrate to Huo Yuanjia the different grades of tea and why some tea is better than other tea. Huo Yuanjia comments that all tea to him is the same. There are different methods of preparing it and different leaves used, but ultimately they are all hot water and steeped leaves. This explicitly constructs an analogy to martial arts where no *wushu* style is superior and competition is not about proving the value of one particular style (which was Huo Yuanjia's original reason for fighting), but rather is about personal realization and development. Tanaka is impressed by Huo Yuanjia's philosophical attitude and the two mutually recognize each other's inherent value. Again this recognition of value locates Huo Yuanjia within the martial hero tradition, concretizing his identity.

Interestingly, in the film, the ultimate villain is the Japanese representative who has Huo Yuanjia poisoned. The representative evokes the historical specter of the evil Meiji Japanese invader complete with fully westernized garb and a desire for an increased piece of Shanghai (and metaphorically all of northeast China). Tanaka, conversely, is never cast as villainous. His honor and respect transcend national barriers. However, this transnational notion is undermined by the fact that in the ring, Tanaka and Huo Yuanjia face each other as explicitly national figures. Tanaka represents Japan while Huo Yuanjia embodies China. Although Tanaka and Huo Yuanjia are martial brothers, bound by their recognition of each other's worth (*zhiji)*, their identities are inextricably intertwined with nationalism.

The film's finale is the battle between Huo Yuanjia and the four foreign champions. The indigent's claim that Huo Yuanjia is champion of the world becomes prophetic as Huo Yuanjia defeats the French, American, and British fighters. When Huo Yuanjia and Tanaka face off, they are evenly matched to the point that they exchange weapons in midcombat, then decide to pause while switching back. The first round is called as a draw. During the round transition, Huo Yuanjia drinks poisoned tea planted by the Japanese representative. The fact that tea is the means of Huo Yuanjia's demise echoes the conversation between Tanaka and Huo Yuanjia. There are different grades of tea and some tea can be poisonous. Likewise, *wushu* can also be poisonous. Huo Yuanjia's original identity is that of a poisonous dragon. He destroys all that he touches. The Japanese representative echoes Huo Yuanjia's earlier identity when he tells Tanaka that he must win at any cost. The drive to win, rather than to compete, poisoned Huo Yuanjia earlier metaphorically and now literally.

Despite being poisoned, Huo Yuanjia continues the competition. What is intriguing is the chant in which Jinsun leads the crowd, chanting Huo Yuanjia's name, associating Huo Yuanjia's struggle in the ring with the entire Chinese crowd. The fight ceases to be about Huo Yuanjia's self-exploration and identity construction. Here the fight, and Huo Yuanjia, becomes entirely about nationalism. Even when outnumbered, poisoned, and cheated against, China continues to stand up to the foreign opposition. Moreover, Huo Yuanjia wins the fight. He pulls his heart strike, the same blow which killed Chin, so as not to kill Tanaka. Huo Yuanjia dies finally understanding his father. Further, Huo Yuanjia reclaims his masculinity. He is no longer emasculated by his own

poison. Rather, he has overcome the poison of foreigners to prove that China is not longer ‘the sick man of Asia.’ Stephen Teo argues that "the lesson of *Fearless* is that the martial arts must be constrained in both the understanding and the practice of it. Its association with nationalism can destroy the spirit of the individual as its force and power as well is capable of whipping up the crowd into a nationalistic frenzy" (Teo 2009: 95). An alternative reading of the film suggests that the nationalist component of martial arts is not what destroyed Huo Yuanjia. Rather, Huo Yuanjia was destroyed by his lack of nationalism and his self-centered existence: Huo Yuanjia lacked an understanding of the importance of the imagined Chinese community. Only through reconstructing himself and taking on the nationalist task of promoting Chinese interests against the colonial powers does Huo Yuanjia find redemption. The crowd is whipped into a nationalist frenzy despite the realization that Huo Yuanjia will die. Huo Yuanjia's restraint elevates him to the status of a national martyr. By not killing Tanaka, Huo Yuanjia demonstrates not only the martial superiority of China but also the moral superiority as well. His understanding of the value of life only came through his nationalist awakening.

Huang Feihong also offers a complicated view of China's relationship with the colonial powers. Early in the film, Huang Feihong is entrusted with the general's fan. That fan is linked to the actions and attitudes of both the Americans and the British occupying China. The British are the more benign occupier who offer support throughout the film to the Americans and take advantage of China, yet fire on the American ship during the film’s climax. The Chinese *yamen* are explicitly linked to foreign corruption

because they constantly harass Huang Feihong and Po Chi Lam despite the fact that Huang Feihong and his school are the targets of raids by thugs from another province. Further, the *yamen* function in deference to Mr. Jackson and the Americans. The *yamen* are quick to vilify Chinese rather than risk antagonizing foreign occupiers. The Americans in the film are the worst of the villains. They fire into an unarmed, unresisting crowd; they plot to assassinate Huang Feihong; they ally themselves with the gangsters; they engage in prostitution, slave labor, and kidnapping; and finally, they cite the unequal treaties to support all of their illegal actions. Perhaps because of the anxieties over the 1997 reacquisition of Hong Kong, the British are portrayed as less rapacious. Yet, the film sets up a distinct division between foreign and Chinese which suggests a specific 'Chineseness.'

A prime example of the complexity of the division between foreign and Chinese is the Catholic priest. Early in the film, the priest leads a group of Westernized Chinese converts through the street singing hymns. The Western music and message are largely ignored by the crowd, being just one more intrusion into their lives. When the Catholic singers pass by a restaurant where a group of traditional Chinese musicians is performing, the musicians decide to drown out the priest and his choir. In response, the Catholics begin singing much more loudly in order to be heard over the sound of the Chinese music. Tsui Hark utilizes a shot-reverse shot strategy to capture the back and forth contest between the two music groups. While this contest escalates, the crowd in the background attempts to ignore both groups covering their ears and shouting as the racket escalates.

Business continues virtually uninterrupted as neither the Western religion nor the traditional music seem to hold much sway over the general populace. Both the singers and the musicians are simply competing noises with neither message processed or accepted by the intended audience. Ultimately, both sides are silenced by the signal horn of the American gunship. Competing philosophical traditions are only so much noise but the sound of foreign conquest is sufficient to make everyone pause.

The priest plays a far more significant role later in the film after Huang Feihong captures the leader of the extortionists. Huang Feihong enters a restaurant in disguise – the same restaurant where the musicians and Catholics tried to drown each other out – and defends the owner of the establishment from the extortionists. After defeating the gang and holding the leader, Huang Feihong asks the restaurant owner and victim to serve as witness against the criminal. No one in the crowd wants any part of the matter and the restaurant owner claims that all he saw was a martial arts demonstration. There was no fighting or extortion because the *yamen* would rather punish everyone involved with a skirmish rather than seek out justice.

Later, Huang Feihong is approached by the priest who is proselyting. The Priest wants to tell Huang Feihong about Christ. Huang Feihong tells the priest he caught a criminal and asks if Christ will stand as a witness against the criminal, then walks off in disgust. This scene sets up the context for the priest's involvement in saving Aunt Thirteen. At night, the extortionists raid Po Chi Lam, attacking with flaming arrows. The priest happens to walk by and recognizes the leader of the extortionists. After the fire, he offers to stand as a witness against the extortionists. Here the priest serves two functions:

first, he illustrates that not all foreigners (particularly Americans) are bad; second, he serves as an embodiment of his faith. The priest is willing to step in and serve as a witness for Huang Feihong. Further, at the opera, the priest moves in front of Aunt Thirteen, taking bullet fire and sacrificing himself for her. While Mr. Jackson represents all that is evil about America, the Catholic priest represents what is good.

Tsui Hark captures the divide between good and evil Americans by establishing a parallel between Catholic proselyting and Mr. Jackson's labor recruitment. Both the priest and the recruiter offer the promise of a better life based on the allure of the foreign. While the recruiter functions entirely on lies and exploitation, the priest, through his actions, seems to offer a more genuine product. The recruiters simply want to squeeze China for its resources of cash and labor while the priest is portrayed as genuinely having concern for the welfare of China's souls. As witness and as martyr, the priest can be read as an orientalizing figure in the tradition of Edward Said. He is the white, European, masculine figure who alone is capable of understanding and saving the non-white, female, Asian both literally and metaphysically:

> He is no longer a modern man, but a visionary seer more or less contemporary with God; if the Judean desert has been silent since God spoke there, it is Chateaubriand who can hear the silence, understand its meaning, and – to his reader – make the desert speak again (Said 173).

However, the priest's martyrdom can also be read in a different way. In giving his life to save Aunt Thirteen, he completely undermines Huang Feihong's chances at finding justice. His martyrdom is hollow because although Aunt Thirteen lives, nothing is truly saved. Po Chi Lam is still under assault, Huang Feihong is still persecuted by the

yamen, and eventually Huang Feihong is jailed while Aunt Thirteen is captured by the slavers. In this alternate reading, the priest is a mirror of Bucktooth So.

Visually the parallel between the priest and Bucktooth So is captured in their attire. The priest wears black while Bucktooth So dresses in a white, Western suit. Both the priest and Bucktooth So are liminal figures who traverse two cultures. Bucktooth So speaks English while the priest speaks Chinese. Both Bucktooth So and the priest live or lived in foreign lands. Both figures mingle success and failure. The priest successfully saves Aunt Thirteen from bullets yet fails to serve as a witness for Huang Feihong. Bucktooth So fails to save a patient due to his inability to read Chinese characters, yet during the raid on the American ship, it is Bucktooth So's command of English which confuses the cannoneers and saves Huang Feihong and the Po Chi Lam students. The priest's liminality ultimately fails while Bucktooth So's succeeds: "neither revered masters nor martial arts experts, the Westernized Yee [Aunt Thirteen] and Sol [Bucktooth So] intervene during significant moments and use their Western expertise to aid a hero who benefits from that knowledge" (Williams 11). This parallel may suggest that Chinese adoption and integration of Western technology is ultimately more successful than Western relationship to Chinese culture, however, the sense of Bucktooth So having lost his 'Chineseness' when he cuts his queue does not allow a simple reading. Since nationalism, as well as gender, is signified by the queue, Bucktooth So's nationalism is problematic after having cut his own queue. The queue is a symbol of Qing subjugation but it is used in the film as a clear marker of China: only the Chinese men wear queues. When Bucktooth So cuts his queue, he also metaphorically cuts his ties to Chinese

nationalism. The queue-cutting also serves as a self-imposed castration. He becomes a national eunuch, having a Chinese face but a Westernized spirit.

Each of the three films discusses issues of nationalism. *Yingxiong*, unlike *Huang Feihong* and *Huo Yuanjia*, does not explicitly address foreign colonialism. Rather, nationalism in *Yingxiong* is explicitly linked to the idea of *Tianxia* (all under heaven), suggesting a broader notion of 'Chineseness' that transcends boundaries on a map. After the battle with Wuming during the blue narrative, Broken Sword delivers his weapon to Wuming. Broken Sword's delivery serves a specific function. He wants to offer Wuming two calligraphic characters, 天下 (*tianxia*), which translate into all under heaven or a unified China. Broken Sword recognizes that Qin's underlying desire is to unite China and to construct an imperial identity founded on 'Chineseness'; a notion which is reinforced by the visual imagery of the chess house, the calligraphy school, and the martial arts. Broken Sword hopes that this revelation will persuade Wuming to abandon his assassination attempt. Broken Sword has loyalty to something greater than family or kingdom: he believes in the idea of a unified China embodying loyalty to place; being 'Chinese' is more important than being 'Zhou'. The recognition of worth overrides other martial values such as loyalty and revenge. Only Flying Snow fails to recognize the value of *tianxia*. In the end, Flying Snow destroys her lover and herself because of her inability to see beyond revenge.

For Berry, Zhang Yimou's recasting of the king of Qin from a historically vilified tyrant into a metonymical symbol of contemporary China (Berry 166) illustrates Peter Heeh's explanation of the mythologization of the past: "links with the past are fabricated

in an ‘attempt to structure at least some parts of social life’ in a world of ‘constant change and innovation’ as ‘unchanging and invariant’” (Heehs 3). In order for contemporary China to find structure, it must construct a past which offers continuity with the present. However, Berry’s claim that the king of Qin embodies a peaceful, unified contemporary Chinese nation is questioned by the calligraphic characters employed by Broken Sword to stop the assassination. Broken Sword uses *tianxia* rather than 中国(*Zhongguo*) which currently is used to mean China. According to Zhang Xudong, “tianxia is a prenationalist or protonationalist notion of an empire, a civilization, and a universe all rolled into one; as such it runs counter to the ideology of modern nationalism which emphasize individual rights and change” (Zhang 1998, 114-5). If *tianxia* is considered to be a prenationalist or protonationalist ideology which runs counter to modern conceptions of nationalism, then Zhang Yimou’s “symbolic submission to tyrannical power in a new allegory of the unified China as *tianxia*” (Zhang 2004, 293) cannot be taken at face value. In fact, Zhang Yimou admits that “no contemporary Chinese film is totally free of political messages. They are either imposed by the authorities or implied by the artist” (Tan 3). Much of the criticism of *Yingxiong* is that the verbal politics of submission to a unified state are imposed by the authorities and that the film is simply a manifestation of Zhang Yimou selling out his artistic integrity. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that “groups can also use images of the past and struggles over history as vehicles for establishing their power” (Olick 127). The visual coding in *Yingxiong* suggests the possibility of a more complicated reading of Zhang Yimou’s complicity, or lack thereof, with the state.

Most crucial here is Zhang's coding of the narrative of passion, which is rejected as implausible by Qin, as red: the color of state hegemony. The narrative colors associated with Qin are blue and black (black being the historical color used by Qin), not the red of contemporary politics: a color culturally embedded with notions of power and fortune. For Zhang Yimou "history and the present are the same. The reason [he] make[s] more films about history is that historical themes are less censored. Although a strict system of censorship has existed in China for many years, there is some leeway in historic themes" (Tan 10). Zhang Yimou uses the flexibility of historical matter to bypass censorship of the underlying politics embedded in the visual coding of the narrative. The apparent submission to state authority in the verbal narrative vies with a resistance to submission in the visual narrative. It is within the contested space that the unreliability of narrative allows for a visual politics of identity construction which is crucial to revitalizing contemporary China. I will return to this point in greater detail below.

CHAPTER 5

ZHIJI

Both nation and gender are signified and circumscribed by codes of conduct. These codes include proper Confucian hierarchical relationships, Buddhist principles of enlightenment, martial hero codes of honor and righteousness, as well as the importance of recognizing the worth of others. Historical *wuxia* heroes celebrate valor, personal integrity, as well as loyalty, "specifically loyalty to a *zhi ji*, one who recognizes and gives employment to an individual's unique talents" (Hamm 13). Adherence to codes and violation of codes construct a martial hero's identity. Broken Sword, Qin, and Wuming all illustrate these values. Likewise, the mythical Huo Yuanjia in Ronny Yu's *Huo Yuanjia* also embodies these beliefs.

Huo Yuanjia centers on recognition of worth and finding one's place. The main character begins the film as the "sick man of Asia." Huo Yuanjia has asthma and is kept from learning *wushu* because his father believes the training will weaken him further. Huo Yuanjia is also morally sick. He becomes obsessed with competition to the point of becoming both a disobedient son and a poor father figure. He spends the majority of his time drinking with freeloaders who flatter him with requests to become his students. Huo Yuanjia's flawed character is revealed in his interaction with these 'students.' Huo Yuanjia is flattered by adoration and buys drinks for his new brothers (*xiongdi*). However,

he is incapable of paying his debts and his true friend, Jinsun, is alienated by Huo Yuanjia's inability to discern truth. Within the context of the martial hero tradition, Huo Yuanjia is a complete failure. His students and 'brothers' are never shown to amount to anything. When Huo Yuanjia returns from the countryside, his top students are working as bouncers for a local shop. They apologize to Huo Yuanjia for their failure to amount to anything. The film offers no depiction of Huo Yuanjia training or instructing his students; rather, they are always portrayed together in restaurants drinking late into the night. Ultimately, Huo Yuanjia's life is completely derailed because of his lack of judgment concerning his 'brothers.' When one of his students comes forward after having been beaten, Huo Yuanjia immediately seeks out revenge against Chin, a rival martial artist. Huo Yuanjia bursts into Chin's birthday celebration and demands a match. Here Huo Yuanjia again violates any sort of moral propriety. Chin politely asks Huo Yuanjia to face him another time where neither the restaurant nor the guests will be damaged. Huo Yuanjia refuses postponement and claims he will pay for all the damages. In each of these instances Huo Yuanjia fails to recognize the true value of his 'students' who are worthless. He does not truly understand *zhiji* nor does he understand the point of martial competition. This lack of understanding is played out in the fight with Chin.

The fight scene between Chin and Huo Yuanjia is pivotal in terms of plot and visuality within the film. While Huo Yuanjia fights for misguided revenge, he metaphorically dismantles his life; simultaneously, Huo Yuanjia visually dismantles the restaurant. Crucially, the end of the battle takes place in a wine cellar. China and Huo Yuanjia fight amidst barrels of Huo Yuanjia's vice. The action is fast-paced with Ronny

Yu utilizing speed-changes and quick cuts to illustrate the recklessness with which Huo Yuanjia destroys himself. Eventually, Huo Yuanjia obtains his revenge by striking Chin's heart. He then proceeds across the street to drink the rest of the night away with his 'brothers.' Huo Yuanjia's drunken revelry parallels his fight against Chin. In both situations, Huo Yuanjia is undone by his reckless behavior. He does not understand the importance of mercy nor does he understand that blind revenge does not solve any problems.

Huo Yuanjia's deconstruction is finalized when he stumbles out into the plaza and is informed by Jinsun that Chin has died. Huo Yuanjia is then approached by the local indigent who always asks Huo Yuanjia if he will be champion of Tianjin today. At this meeting, the indigent tells Huo Yuanjia today is his day. Such a statement is troubling. The day of Chin's death is the day in which Huo Yuanjia becomes the undisputed champion of Tianjin (having defeated or killed the competition). It is also the day in which Huo Yuanjia is completely undone. Huo Yuanjia returns home to find his family slaughtered by Chin's godson. Huo Yuanjia rushes to seek further revenge; however, he is denied when Chin's godson slits his own throat. Here Huo Yuanjia is completely deconstructed. His identity has been shattered. He gained all that he desired in becoming the champion of Tianjin; however, his family is slaughtered, his mind is reeling from alcohol, and his relationship with Jinsun is destroyed. Upon realizing revenge cannot be attained, Huo Yuanjia drops his sword. Ronny Yu draws out this scene to highlight Huo Yuanjia's emasculation. As the phallic symbol drops, Huo Yuanjia functionally has neither identity nor gender. He becomes a nameless wanderer who flees Tianjin. By

transgressing the martial codes of conduct, and particularly by failing to understand *zhiji*, Huo Yuanjia loses his identity and must be remade by an understanding and appreciation for those codes.

Huang Feihong largely abides by the restrictions of Confucian relationships and the legal system. Feihong wants to adhere to prescribed codes; however, he, like Huo Yuanjia, violates the tenets of the codes. Huang Feihong's desire for Aunt Thirteen troubles a reading of his leaving the jail as following the martial hero code. Martial heroes are bound to help those in distress, particularly women under sexual assault. Aunt Thirteen has been captured for a brothel and is about to be raped by the leader of the gangsters. Huang Feihong, as a martial hero, is obligated to respond to such a situation by selflessly rushing to aid the 'damsel in distress.' However, Huang Feihong is not motivated simply by martial honor. Rather, as clearly illustrated by his memory of Aunt Thirteen, Huang Feihong responds out of a desire to save the woman he cares for. Huang Feihong adheres neither to the Confucian codes nor to the martial hero codes. Unlike Li Mubai, Huang Feihong is willing to take action on behalf of his emotions without the impetus of imminent death. Huang Feihong's transgression of the codes of conduct illustrates that boundaries can be crossed in the *wuxia* genre. While the codes are inherently good, allowing stability and order, they can also be stifling and it is at that moment when the martial hero must transgress the codes in order to progress.

Yingxiong uses setting and genre to situate behavioral codes and to complicate those codes. Zhang Yimou constructs a Chinese identity in the mythological, historical past in order to "criticize, modernize, and revitalize the myth, and regenerate the nation"

(Berry 139). Distancing the narrative from historical 'fact' allows Zhang Yimou to locate his identity construction "in China's old and remote areas, where social fantasy, whose creation of a present identity is always through a nostalgic imagining of a permanent other time and other place, can flourish most uninhibitedly" (Chow 1995: 78). Because Broken Sword, and later Wuming, choose to submit to the idea of a unified China, the present identity of a unified China can flourish. Submission to unified China stems from a deferral, by Wuming, to both following the appropriate behavior coded in Confucian ethics and martial camaraderie: "Confucian codes provided an ethnic symbol of a past order based primarily on moral suasion rather than legal compulsion or military might" (Berry 139). Wuming is persuaded not by Qin's legal tenets nor by the Qin army's might; Wuming is persuaded by Broken Sword's morals which are visually inscribed in both calligraphy and martial prowess. Zhang Yimou constructs a Chinese identity that does not simply submit to force or legal compulsion. Rather, the identity is constructed through the visual signifiers of ethnic identity and through the construction of narrative. Which color-coded narrative the audience ultimately believes in is not as important as the collaborative process through which the narratives are created. By highlighting the unreliability of narrative, Zhang Yimou challenges his audience to seek the visual signifiers and power relations which define Wuming's identity rather than simply offering an 'objective' historical narrative. In this sense, the politics of *Yingxiong* are not those prescribed by state censors, but are rather those imparted by the artist.

The overarching narrative from Wuming's perspective is coded in a gray tone. As Wuming describes his encounter with Big Sky, and as he speaks to Qin, the gray hues

indicate that the narrative is from Wuming's perspective. His story is straight-forward and plausible. He tracks down Big Sky, a wanted assassin, confronts him at a chess house and defeats him. Zhang Yimou uses the gray palette through this narrative to emphasize certain elements. The chess game is played using large black and white stones. The rain falling during the scene is dull and comes from a gray, overcast sky. Big Sky's name suggests that he, like the sky, is gloomy, his fortunes are cast. Further, Big Sky is notorious for his silver spear. Finally, Wuming and Big Sky engage in a mental struggle and the gray tones enhance the metaphysical feel of the scene.

The battle between Wuming and Big Sky illustrates several aspects of the construction of collective memory. Wuming remembers the scene as he narrates the battle for Qin. At the same time, the initial battle between Wuming and Big Sky takes place in the mind. The battle is collaboratively constructed by Wuming and Big Sky. Only through their combined effort does the contest occur. Wuming narrates his account of the shared mythological moment for Qin. Thus, the narrative is mediated through two levels. The first level is between Qin and Wuming; the narrative is constructed by Wuming for the specific purpose of getting closer physically to Qin. The second level is between Wuming and Big Sky; the narrative is constructed mentally with Wuming defeating Big Sky in both the metaphysical and physical encounters. Because the narrative is limited to Wuming's perspective, it is subject to question.

The second phase of the narrative is coded red and ultimately is the most thoroughly problematic of the narrative strands. In this narrative strand, red clearly suggests passion; however, red for Zhang Yimou always carries connotations beyond

simply representing either nationalism (i.e., Red China) or passion (as illustrated by *Red Sorghum, Raise the Red Lantern,* and *Road Home*). I will return later in greater detail to Zhang Yimou's systematic use of red in his films. The red narrative is similar to the gray narrative in that it is mediated by Wuming and Qin's relationship: the narrative only exists as a story told by Wuming to Qin. This narrative has a certain level of plausibility, yet is rejected by Qin. Wuming creates a narrative in which a love quadrangle between Big Sky, Flying Snow, Broken Sword, and Moon allows Wuming to manipulate the assassins and defeat them individually. Wuming travels to a calligraphy school where he exposes Flying Snow and Big Sky's affair to Broken Sword. Broken Sword turns to Moon in a revenge tryst and Flying Snow kills him for that betrayal. After facing Moon, who seeks revenge out of loyalty to Broken Sword, Flying Snow is distraught and worn and loses to Wuming. The red narrative offers several pertinent facts. Wuming brings both Broken Sword's and Flying Snow's weapons to Qin and therefore both had to be defeated. Broken Sword and Flying Snow are known lovers. The threads of loyalty and revenge underpinning the red narrative are plausible within the martial tradition since those themes are crucial aspects of martial heroes.

However, the Qin emperor does not believe the narrative. He is unwilling to buy into Wuming's construction and offers his own version (the blue narrative). Qin is skeptical because although Wuming's tale seems plausible, it ultimately does not adhere to the generic conventions of martial romance. For Qin, Flying Snow and Broken Sword are 'mandarin ducks': two lovers whose connection is so deep that they cannot be separated even in death. Qin cannot accept Wuming's story of petty lust and betrayal

because he recognizes the sincerity and loyalty in Broken Sword. A major tenet of the martial romance genre is being recognized for your talent. Qin recognizes Broken Sword's worth and refuses to believe a narrative in which Broken Sword acts in a petty, irrational manner fueled by jealous passion. Although the idea of killing for revenge is suitable within the confines of generic convention, petty jealousy and betrayal are not suitable for 'mandarin ducks.'

Qin cannot accept a single narrative from Wuming; rather, he must engage in constructing his own version of events which reconciles the proper behavior of martial heroes within the generic convention. Qin's version of the story is visually coded as blue. In the blue narrative, Flying Snow and Broken Sword are utterly devoted to each other. Wuming explains to the assassins that he convinced Big Sky to help him assassinate Qin. Wuming has developed a sword technique which is inescapably deadly within twenty paces. He demonstrates his skill and says that he defeated Big Sky and would need the sword of one other assassin to come within the necessary distance. Broken Sword and Flying Snow both head to the confrontation with Wuming; however, Flying Snow is slightly faster in pulling her sword to stab Broken Sword. Flying Snow stabs Broken Sword so he will be unable to face Wuming; she prevents his death by sacrificing herself to the cause of revenge against Qin. When Wuming faces Flying Snow, she calls for him to draw his sword. He hesitates because he recognizes the relationship of Flying Snow and Broken Sword as truly noble as well as recognizing the depth of Flying Snow's sacrifice. Wuming cannot initially fight such a paragon of martial virtue. However, Wuming's devotion to revenge overcomes his respect for Flying Snow and he defeats her.

For Qin, Wuming's unwavering loyalty to the Zhao kingdom outweighs any other concerns.

After defeating Flying Snow, Wuming follows Broken Sword to a lake where Flying Snow is laying in state. Having separated Broken Sword from Flying Snow, Wuming can now overcome Broken Sword's superior skill. They engage in a battle which is choreographed as a water ballet. The battle parallels the mental contest between Wuming and Big Sky from the gray narrative. The struggle ends when Broken Sword notices a drop of water land on Flying Snow resembling a tear. He leaves the fight to remove the teardrop and Wuming has the opportunity to stab Broken Sword in the back. Wuming hesitates, however, because he is still overcome by his recognition of Broken Sword's value as a martial hero. As Wuming leaves, he is met by Moon who delivers Broken Sword's sword. Broken Sword and Flying Snow were inseparable in life and their swords should not be separated in death. The subtext here suggests that Broken Sword will die without Flying Snow and will have no further need of his sword.

Again, the blue narrative offers plausibility in its construction. Certain underlying facts frame each narrative: Wuming defeated Big Sky, Broken Sword, and Flying Snow; Wuming only publicly faced Big Sky and Flying Snow; Flying Snow incapacitated Broken Sword. These facts underpin each narrative, including the final white narrative. Unlike the red narrative, the blue narrative is not dominated by jealousy and betrayal. Rather, the blue narrative is dominated by the respect, loyalty, and recognition inherent in the martial romance tradition. Wuming recognizes the inseparable 'mandarin ducks' in Broken Sword and Flying Snow. Flying Snow recognizes the prowess of Wuming and his

ability to defeat Qin and therefore accomplish the revenge required by each of the assassin's loyalty to the Zhao kingdom. The Qin emperor, through his narrative, recognizes the specific martial values of Broken Sword and Flying Snow, placing them into a melodramatic framework appropriate to the genre.

At this moment, Wuming interrupts Qin's blue narrative by claiming that Qin did not in fact actually recognize the true worth of Broken Sword. The final main narrative is coded white, ostensibly suggesting the truth. In the white narrative, Wuming has not slain Big Sky. Wuming has developed a secret martial technique which is so precise that it cannot miss within ten paces. Rather than slaying Big Sky, Wuming has earned Big Sky's trust and has nonfatally wounded him with a precise strike which missed the organs. Big Sky is convalescing in secret when Wuming approaches Flying Snow and Broken Sword. Wuming demonstrated his sword technique for the assassins but rather than illustrating his raw power by demolishing stacks of scrolls, he highlights his precision by piercing a white arrow within a cloud of black arrows. Upon seeing this display, Flying Snow readily agrees to aid Wuming in his assassination attempt. Her devotion to the cause of revenge prevents her from recognizing any inherent value in the Qin conquest. Broken Sword, on the other hand, refuses to help and his rejection of Wuming prompts Flying Snow to attack him. During their battle, Flying Snow injures Broken Sword with the help of Wuming. In this narrative, Broken Sword is again dispatched prior to the public confrontation with Wuming. Wuming again faces Flying Snow, this time nonfatally striking her.

The white narrative acknowledges the codes, unlike the red narrative. However, the white narrative does not narrowly confine the martial heroes to only the roles prescribed by genre and convention. In the white narrative, Broken Sword and Flying Snow fulfill the generic conventions of 'mandarin ducks,' but this convention is troubled by Flying Snow's inability to see beyond her desire for revenge to understand Broken Sword's ideology. The white narrative uses martial hero codes to emphasize the value of Broken Sword and Qin's broader understanding of 'Chineseness.' This 'Chineseness' is based not entirely on prescribed behavioral codes, but is influenced by them. Qin offers a vision of China which is inclusive. All of the ethnically Chinese states would be gathered under a unified kingdom. Broken Sword, and later Wuming, are compelled by this idea of a greater 'Chineseness' because they recognize the value of Qin's plan. Combined, each individual state, i.e., Zhou, would be stronger when united under Qin's banner. Although Qin's methods are brutal, his intention is more than simple conquest. Broken Sword recognizes Qin's motivation and approves of constructing a broader, imagined community.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Four Chinese films by different directors, covering different time periods, geographic regions, dialects, and cultures each offer a conception of 'Chineseness' illustrated by the themes of nationalism, gender, and *zhiji*. *Wohu Canglong* serves as a foil and mirror to the other three films. *Wohu Canglong* focuses more on femininity than masculinity, does not present Li Lianjie as the star, and does not directly reference historical figures. Yet, *Wohu Canglong* engages the same issues as the other three films. Ang Lee used an international, diasporic Chinese cast and crew to construct an idea of 'China' through the lens of the *wuxia pian*. Because of how *Wohu Canglong* was made, it indirectly addresses the issue of *tianxia.* If *tianxia* is conceptually a broader imagined Chinese community (i.e., not bound simply by geographic boundaries), then *Wohu Canglong* was crafted by a *tianxia* community.

Huo Yuanjia also suggests a broader community; however, this community is comprised of peasants and urbanites working together to stand against encroaching outside influence. Within the film, the historical ties of Huo Yuanjia and Jinsun to the revolution are downplayed. The film, then, stands not as a revolutionary piece; rather, it functions as a film focusing more on personal development and the spirit of *wushu*.

Ronny Yu constructed a mythologized story rather than a historic portrayal in order to broaden the film's appeal and increase overseas attention. In this way, *Huo Yuanjia* is simiar to *Wohu Canglong*, designed with a broader, international, and diasporic audience in mind.

In *Huang Feihong*, Huang's masculinity is linked to a sense of 'Chineseness' which combines both tradition and modernity. Huang respects tradition in the form of Confucian hierarchy, martial loyalty, traditional medicine and martial arts practices, and the queue. Huang Feihong also adopts aspects of modernity which transform his masculinity into a hybrid. Huang Feihong is able to temporarily abandon Confucian hierarchy, adopt the use of bullets, and wear a Western suit. Huang Feihong's hybrid, modern 'Chineseness' adapts Western technology and ideas into an identity which does not abandon its links to Chinese tradition. The gangsters and Iron Vest Yim each sell out. They engage in prostitution, debasing behavior, extortion, rape, and murder all for the sake of worldly gain. Huang Feihong, conversely, does not lose his morality when faced with the imposition of the foreign and the changes of modernization. At no point does Huang Feihong sink into an animalistic state. Rather, he remains throughout the extensive fight sequence with Iron Vest Yim calm and controlled. Despite the great injustices, unfairness, oppression, and hardships, Huang remains at all times self-composed. He does not lose his sense of nationalism (a sense which links China and *tianxia* -the term used both by the general and Huang Feihong in the prologue- rather than *zhongguo*) nor his masculinity. He does, however, negotiate a masculinity which will eventually allow

for an open relationship with Aunt Thirteen (in the later films in the series) and which allows for greater adoption and adaption of Western technology without sacrificing Chinese tradition. Tsui Hark's depiction of Huang Feihong as "the model of an early twentieth-century *xia* warrior inheriting and passing on historicist topoi of patriarchy, celibacy, nationalism, and a Confucian ethos mixed with Buddhist principles of tolerance, virtue and patience, but within the body of a Cantonese language and identity" (Teo 2009: 59) creates a mythologized historic figure who represents a particular vision of idealized 'Chineseness' in the *wuxia* film. Huang Feihong's actions do not always align with the visual politics of the film. Huang Feihong's desire for Aunt Thirteen, the imagery of the flickering candle which inspires him to violate codes, and the oblique way in which Huang Feihong expresses his desire for Aunt Thirteen are all fundamentally inscribed in the visual presentation and not in the dialogue. Zhang Yimou also presents an idealized 'Chineseness,' and, like Tsui Hark, Zhang uses a disconnect between dialogue and visual imagery to construct a visual politics of identity.

In order to better understand the politics of *Yingxiong*, Zhang Yimou's biography and earlier works need to be examined. Paul Clark's *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films* offers a biographical sketch of the Chinese "fifth generation" filmmakers and overview and analysis of key "fifth generation" films. Clark traces the history of the "fifth generation" through the effects of Maoism, the Cultural Revolution, rustification, and eventual economic reform under Deng Xiaoping. Clark describes Zhang's experience growing up as fraught with hardship and being labeled as the son of a 'historical anti-revolutionary,' which made finding work or education difficult. The Red Guard riots and

excesses of the Cultural Revolution followed by exile for many urban youth profoundly affected Zhang Yimou:

> the seminal Cultural Revolution experience for the future members of the Beijing Film Academy class of '82 was not the trauma of parents being arrested or teachers being beaten. It was going 'down to the villages and up the mountains' (*shangshan xiaxiang*) to live as peasants, soldiers, or workers after 1968. Wrenched from the familiarity of home and hometown, young people found themselves in exile with no firm forecast of ever returning to the cities or resuming their education. This experience was crucial in shaping Chinese culture, including films (Clark 28).

Clark rightly analyzes Zhang's early work, *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum*, as containing visual imagery which is full of political subtext. However, Clark completely dismisses Zhang's later work, especially *Yingxiong*, as selling out to the PRC political machine and the censors. Rather than seeing the continuity between *Red Sorghum* and *Yingxiong*, Clark derisively dismisses *Yingxiong* as simply a tool of state propaganda and an orientalizing venue for Western consumption.

Two of Zhang Yimou's early films, *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, illustrate how absolutely important the color red is to Zhang Yimou's filmmaking. In both films, red functions as a troubled sign: the signifier remains constant (the color red) while the signified shifts constantly. Red has a strong connotation within Chinese culture of power and good fortune. Red is also strongly associated with Maoism, the Red Guard, the Cultural Revolution, and the Chinese Communist state. Zhang Yimou further infuses the color with concepts of passion, jealousy, hatred, and vengeance. In *Red Sorghum*, a vat of red sorghum spirits with red cloth draping into it is symbolic both of an illicit affair and of murder. Moreover "color is a central, coded element. The red of the spirits symbolizes the passions of the heroes, their life, and ultimately their deaths in the

struggle to defend their homes" (Clark 166). The defense of place is politically subversive since "it is the people - without the Party, without the PLA - that rise up against the Japanese, and they could very well rise up again" (Silbergeld 79). Even more strikingly, in *Raise the Red Lantern*, the red lanterns are explicitly erotic symbols as the wives compete to have their lantern raised, thus winning the physical attention of their husband for the night.

In his later films, Zhang Yimou continued to use red as a visual signifier. In *Wode fuqin muqin (The Road Home)*, the color red signifies youth, exuberance, and developing love. Clark downplays *Wode fuqin muqin* as simply nostalgic and lacking political undertones; however, red also plays a prominent part when the father is arrested and removed from the school. Although the scene is not foregrounded, it does directly reference post-1949 political unrest. Further, the color red is pivotal in establishing the strength of the love bond between the parents as well as bringing in cultural coding of power and prosperity in relation to the schoolhouse.

Yingxiong offers Zhang Yimou's most intricate use of red as a troubled signifier. The *Yingxiong* narratives are color-coded and the red narrative, with all its associated signified markers, is the least reliable version. By problematizing the signifier/signified relationship even further through narrative unreliability, Zhang disrupts any easy or simple reading of the dialogue. This is particularly significant since Zhang frequently reduces dialogue and instead stresses long shots and visuals. Clark notes that one of the reasons "fifth generation" filmmakers favored less dialogue was not only because it broke with previous propagandistic films of the 1950s and 1960s, but also because "the censors

subscribed to the notion that dialogue, even in excess, could carry clearer messages to mass audiences than mere images" (Clark 83).

Rey Chow's brief essay "Sentimental Returns" also illustrates Zhang Yimou's history of subversive visual politics. Chow analyzes the imagery of Zhang Yimou's *Wode fuqin muqin*. Unlike Clark, Chow does not dismiss *Wode fuqin muqin* as simply nostalgic. Chow points out that the use of color combined with close, frequent shots of everyday activities enhances rather than detracts from the film. In fact Chow contends that:

> instead of Chinese history, they [the audience] will, most likely, simply understand universal human drama, romance, etc…it is increasingly the abstract – in the form of the reified spectacle – which allows for transmissibility and enables 'communication' at the transcultural level, while the literal, being concrete yet parochial, easily ends up posing a limit to such communication (186).

The imagery which Chinese censors downplay is the key for filmmakers to transmit messages across linguistic and national boundaries.

While *Reading Chinese Transnationalisms: Society, Literature, Film*, edited by Maria N. Ng and Philip Holden, does not directly address *Yingxiong*, it does offer some guidelines on the politics of visuality and the competing forces of transnationalism and Westernization in Chinese film. Jennifer W. Jay's article on *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* explores the transnationalism and Westernization of that film. According to Jay, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was consciously conceived of by Ang Lee as a transnational disaporic Chinese collaboration. The cast and crew were drawn from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and diasporic ethnic Chinese from America, Europe, and Canada.

Despite being internationally successful and lauded, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* received domestic criticism for being too Westernized and received only a lukewarm reception at the domestic box office. As Jay points out, many moments in the subtitling of the film suggest a Western-Chinese hybridization rather than a transnationalism (Ng 139). Kenneth Chan notes that "in reconfiguring the *wuxia pian* into a postmodernist cultural product for a global audience, Lee critiques, often in a rather ambiguous and conflicted fashion, the vexing centrality of traditional culture and patriarchal hegemony in China, especially in light of the liberating possibilities that disaporic mobility, globalization, and transnationalism supposedly present" (Chan 4-5). Of *Yingxiong, Huo Yuanjia*, and *Huang Feihong, Yingxiong* is the closest in both genre and intent to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Jay's analysis of the differentiation between transnationalism and Westernization is a concept which needs to be addressed when considering *Yingxiong.*

Both *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Yingxiong* contain actors from mainland China and Hong Kong in attempts to broaden their appeal. Both films use the same composer, Tan Dun, for the music score. Both films consist of fairly substantial shots of largely empty nature (which Paul Clark claims illustrates the vacuity of content in *Yingxiong*: see Clark 185). Both were created with the intention of appealing to transnational audiences. *Yingxiong* does not contain the Westernization of subtitling that Jay points out in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The characters of *Yingxiong* retain their names (飞雪 becomes Flying Snow, 无名 becomes Nameless) where in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the names are either Westernized completely (娇龙 becomes Jen)

or the Romanization is altered to help English-speaking audiences more easily pronounce the names (秀蓮 becomes Shu Lien). Both Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou have received criticism for constructing a mythological China that is detached from history and offering an Orientalized fantasy for Western consumption (see Chow 2007: 29, Teo 2009: 188 and Xu 42).

The concept of using imagery to bypass censorship is common in Chinese film. Poshek Fu described one of the possibilities of film in 1930s Shanghai where "in an authoritarian and highly politicized situation, apolitical entertainment can become significantly political precisely because it is depoliticized and 'escapist'" (Fu 80). Jerome Silbergeld notes that "along with television and radio, [films] are judged to have the greatest capacity for sowing dissent and receive the most intensive scrutiny from the hardest of China's censors" (Silbergeld 54). One of the reasons Zhang Yimou, Ronny Yu, and Tsui Hark use the *wuxia* genre for political commentary is because "political points are often carried through allusion. 'If you want to talk about current political anxieties,' said producer Nansun Shi in 1988, 'you make it an allegory, put it in the time of the warlords in China'" (Bordwell 40). Thus, visual imagery in opposition to dialogue is the focus point in which political allegory can most strongly be transmitted without being caught by the censors. Chinese scholars have been rather dismissive of *wuxia* directors (particularly Zhang Yimou) claiming that *wuxia* films are devoid of depth and are merely façade spectacles (see Jia 121 and Chen 253). The antagonistic derisiveness of scholars against film allows directors to shape cultural myths precisely because the censors do not treat these films as serious.

Chow also notes that:

> Chineseness in Zhang is a residual structure of feeling that results from the specifics of a country's political history. However aesthetically controlled, a film such as *The Road Home* would not have made sense without the messiness of that history and the burden of hope it tries to salvage therein. This attempt at redemption, incidentally, is quite different from Zhang's early works, in which the criticism of history is much more bleak and violent, and the everyday, such as is associated with wedding rituals, household customs, and various folk practices and objects, tends to be a matter of fabrication (Chow 2007, 81).

Zhang Yimou's films and his conception of 'Chineseness' are both constructed under the rubric of using imagery to address history.

Jerome Silbergeld states that "layer upon layer of negotiated self-censorship is required before, during, and after shooting a film, generating art by committee(s), and requiring film-makers subtlety and subterfuge in the formulation of any dissenting social critique" (Silbergeld 55). Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong* illustrates a case where the dialogue in the film appears to support an uncomplicated reading of political support for the current regime. However, *Yingxiong*, as with most of Zhang Yimou's films, "relies in part on screen image and cinematic structure, on visual rhetoric and reference, to convey past the censor and impart in the audience what they dared not include as spoken text" (Silbergeld 55). It is precisely through the visual imagery and cinematography, the color-coded narrative and the use of empty space that Zhang Yimou can convey a message which runs contrary to state censorship. As in *Red Sorghum* and *Road Home,* the significance of red cannot be downplayed in *Yingxiong*. Nor can the explicit politics underlying red connotations be ignored. *Red Sorghum* presented a politics of passion which ultimately do not signify support of the state. Silbergeld suggests that the stark,

final shot of the Red Sorghum, a lunar eclipse, can be read in multiple ways. One reading is as a link to tradition where the eclipse suggests "a pathetic fallacy indicating the vastness of the destructive metaphor" (Silbergeld 78). Simultaneously, the eclipse may also suggest "a gendered identification of the eclipsing moon with the rebellious female Jiu'er, rising up against the Japanese overlords" (Silbergeld 78). Both of these interpretations have a foreign invader being overthrown by violence; however, while the first interpretation suggests untroubled nationalism and a shift of the mandate of heaven, the second interpretation, being gendered, is troubling because Jiu'er and her rebellion are coded female while the Japanese invaders are coded male, thus reversing positive and negative associations. Silbergeld also suggests a third, subversive interpretation because "in Zhang's Red Sorghum, it is the people – without the Party, without the PLA – that rise up against the Japanese and they could very well rise up again" (Silbergeld 79). Gary Xu critiques Zhang Yimou for presenting a 'sinascape' in his films where Zhang attempts to construct an 'authentic Chineseness.' According to Xu, Zhang "chose to shoot the scenes in *Yingxiong* at the most popular tourist destinations. These sites are popular not only because they showcase natural splendor but also because they preserve significant historical memories and symbolize ethnic harmony" (Xu 36-7). Stephen Teo argues that *Yingxiong* "relies as much on orientalism as on evocations of ancient Chinese history" (Teo 185). For Teo, "Zhang Yimou's perspective as well as those of his colleagues in the fifth generation who have made *wuxia* films is a heavily historicist one that functions as an allegory of the truth of so-called official history and official nationalism" (Teo 187). Teo's critique of Zhang Yimou as self-orientalizing assumes that Zhang Yimou is

holding China up as a spectacle for the West and that that spectacle simply reinforces statist nationalism. However, the very spectacle which Teo and Paul Clark decry as self-orientalizing also serves as the vehicle through which anti-orientalist messages are transmitted. By coding the most problematic narrative – in terms of generic conventions, reliability, plausibility, and acceptance – as red, a color heavily laden with sliding signifiers, Zhang deconstructs or undermines the simpler, statist message of the script which, as with virtually all fifth generation scripts, was consciously processed to pass censorship. While Zhang Yimou's earlier works sought to reach past the censors to an international audience (thus warranting the banning of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Judou*), for *Yingxiong,* Zhang desired to create an international blockbuster which would make sales records at home and abroad. Thus, Zhang turned to his cinematographic background in order to convey a message via spectacle which could not be conveyed through the dialogue.

Each of these films presents an idealized, mythical portrayal of 'Chineseness' which constructs an imagined community not only for the people of mainland China but also for disaporic and transnational people. This community is founded on notions of mythologized history, specific martial-tradition masculinity, and a nationalism that transcends national borders, cultural barriers, and even time:

> the nationalism of kung fu heroes and martial arts cinema in general engenders a sense of 'abstract nationalism' in Chinese audiences who do not live in China itself. It gives to these disaporic audiences the possibility for identification with a China that exists only in the imagination and is effectively an imagined nationalism, following Benedict Anderson's contention that a nation is 'an imagined political community' (Teo 2009: 65).

The imagined community offered closely coincides with the idea of *tianxia*: a broader understanding of China and 'Chineseness,' which extends beyond the physical, geographic boundaries of nation. Broken Sword, Huo Yuanjia, and Huang Feihong each recognized Chinese identity greater than their particular, localized self. Each encompasses a broader range than merely a Zhou assassin, a Tianjin local hero, or a Guangzhou folk hero: these characters are 'Chinese' in a broader sense of an imagined community unified with other Chinese despite geographic and temporal distance and difference.

Transmission of a cultural ideal is not new. However, the particular cultural ideal transmitted by these directors in these films leads to the conclusion that the contemporary, twenty-first century idealized 'Chineseness' is one which incorporates *tianxia* (all under heaven), and is inscribed specifically within the apparatus of the *wuxia* film. *Wuxia* heroes with their adherence to gendered, cultural, national, religious, and ideological codes of conduct provide an ideal archetype for presenting China to the world. The inherent liminality of the *wuxia* figure also reflects the liminality of contemporary Chinese identity. The *wuxia* heroes in these films must traverse the lines between justice and law, between tradition and modernization, between gender boundaries, and performance of proper rituals and roles, so too must contemporary China negotiate emergence as a world power, the end of external colonialism, broad diaspora, and anxieties over potential for the future. Precisely because of these parallels, and because of the lower degree of censorship of the genre, Chinese directors utilize the *wuxia* genre to formulate ideals of 'Chineseness' for contemporary audiences and thus *wuxia* films

resonate with audiences precisely because it is a genre so reflective of current hopes, anxieties, and aspirations. As Stephen Teo states, "the invocation of a Chinese nationalism in the Wong Fei-hung films suggests something still evolving. It is in this sense that it may not be amiss to speak of an essentialism or transcendent cultural identity - the *wuxia* being a signifier of such" (Teo 2009: 67). *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Huo Yuanjia, Huang Feihong,* and *Yingxiong* each illustrate such a transcendent cultural identity inscribed in the *wuxia* genre. Each film utilizes the *wuxia* genre in order to help construct an ideal identity signifying a mythological China which transcends regional and temporal politics.

The goal of this paper is to attempt to formulate a concept of 'Chineseness' within a particular, historic, and limited context. What it means to be Chinese and how Chinese identity is defined are problematic ideas because they change over time and context. Within the scope of this paper, 'Chineseness' refers specifically to a particular vision of identity carried across the four films analyzed. Closely examining how a particular snapshot of Chinese identity is constructed through the medium of popular culture, in particular the *wuxia pian*, may offer insight into identity morphology. By understanding what Chinese film directors present to their audiences, both domestic and international, as a mytholigized 'Chineseness,' scholars can begin to understand how Chinese identity has changed and will continue to change through the construction of a mythological imagined community embedded in popular culture. Thus, Chinese identity can be examined in the broader context of diaspora, transnational movements, and cultural boundary crossings,

particularly through the lens of popular cultural myths such as those embodied in film, leading to a greater understanding of what 'Chinese' actually means.

Moreover, these four films each present an idea of 'Chineseness,' or Chinese identity, which is divorced from the notion of nation. Benedict Anderson's imagined community expands here beyond the scope of an imagined nation-state. These films depict a greater, imagined *tianxia* which suggests certain specific identity traits without linking those traits expressly to a concept of nation. 'Chineseness,' therefore, is a manifestation of identity in a post-Mao, post-Cultural Revolution, 1997 reunification, modern, globalizing context. What these directors are portraying, through a blending of gender, nationalism, and *zhiji*, is an identity in which 'Chineseness' ceases to be a nationalism; rather, 'Chineseness' under *tianxia* becomes an ethnic identity divorced of specific region, linguistic dialect, or even homogenous culture. Under the idealized *tianxia* banner, diverse groups of disaporic Chinese, American-born second and third generation Chinese, Taiwanese, Cantonese, Hong Kong, and mainland Chinese can all share in an imagined community which is greater than the nation state. 'Chineseness,' finally, in the context of contemporary *wuxia pian*, is an idealized identity where nationalism ceases to be the defining parameter for identity formation. Instead, this new identity is defined and shaped by the bounds of the visual images embedded within the flickers of *wuxia pian*.

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